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Lots of new data, no analysis from Wyo. gas field where EPA linked fracking to water pollution

New data on Wyo. frack site await interpretation

By MEAD GRUVER | Associated Press | 4 hours, 3 minutes ago in

The meaning of reams of new data from groundwater testing in a remote Wyoming gas field where the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sparked concern last year will be a matter of interpretation.

In this May 22, 2009 photo shows John Fenton, a farmer who lives near the rural community of Pavillion in central Wyoming, outside his log home near a tank used in natural gas extraction. Fenton and some... (Associated Press)

Does the new science shore up damnation of hydraulic fracturing _ the petroleum industry practice of blasting water, sand and chemicals deep beneath the water table? Or does it refute criticism of the technique as too much anxious hand-wringing?

No one is making either claim yet.

The U.S. Geological Survey on Wednesday released tables showing the amounts of dozens of various chemicals in the groundwater below the Pavillion area of west-central Wyoming. But there was no analysis accompanying the data.

The information, from testing in late April, follows similar tests last year, when the EPA linked contaminants in two water wells to hydraulic fracturing, or fracking.

The new testing shows much lower levels of the carcinogen benzene than what the EPA reported. However, only one of the two wells was tested this time.

With no official interpretation as a guide, the pro-industry and environmental groups that weighed in almost instantly on the sensational EPA draft report in December were conspicuously quiet this time. Even Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead _ who actively sought the new testing and whose own employees had a hand in it _ passed on saying anything about what the data actually meant.

"We will be guided by science in the way we react to the investigation of impacts on water outside of Pavillion," Mead said in a mild prepared statement.

Benzene is a hydrocarbon commonly associated with oil and gas development. Last year's EPA testing showed benzene at almost 50 times the recommended EPA limit. The new data, from tests that involved the state, the USGS, the EPA, and the Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone Indian tribes, show benzene at 3 percent of the recommended EPA limit.

But researchers this time around decided they couldn't extract enough water for a reliable sample from the well that showed the highest amount of benzene last year.

In the well the researchers did use, the amount of any benzene in the groundwater was too small to be detected last year. In that sense, the results for benzene this year are in line with last year's.

The latest data is generally "consistent with groundwater monitoring data previously released," EPA spokeswoman Alisha Johnson said by email.

The EPA has said repeatedly that the findings in Pavillion, where natural gas and drilling for it occurs at a relatively shallow level, can in no way be applied to fracking that occurs in other geologic formations elsewhere.

Encana Corp., the Calgary, Alberta, company that operates the Pavillion gas field, also declined to comment on the meaning of the data. However, company spokesman Doug Hock said the fact that one of the wells didn't produce enough water for the new testing casts doubt on the previous results.

"EPA's wells are improperly constructed," he said by email.

He said Encana would comment on the results after it had more time to review them. Same with some environmentalists: The Natural Resources Defense Council looked at the data and did not comment Wednesday.

"A better interpretation of the data would have been beneficial for the impacted residents and the public," Deb Thomas, of the Powder River Basin Resource Council, said by email. The council has been representing some of the Pavillion residents who have complained about well water that became befouled by chemicals.

Benzene is not among the chemicals the EPA pointed to last year in making the link to fracking. The process of extracting oil and gas involves pumping millions of gallons of water mixed with sand and chemicals down well holes to crack open formations and improve the flow of hydrocarbons.

Pavillion-area homeowners say their water became tainted after gas drilling _ and fracking _ picked up in their neighborhood about seven years ago.

Wyoming officials and the petroleum industry criticized the draft EPA study, characterizing its findings as flimsy. State officials were further incensed the EPA did not consult with them about the testing it was doing on their turf.

Last winter, Wyoming officials and the EPA mended fences and announced they would collaborate with the USGS and the tribes on the new testing. A full peer review of the sampling and findings to date will occur later.

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